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ABSTRACT

Recent national reports reinforce the growing perception that small schools are good schools. This may seem a revolution or the latest fad in schooling; however, issues of size cannot be captured in universal guidelines. This digest discusses the history of school size dilemmas to demonstrate why this is so. The earliest research literature on American school and district size reveals that questions of size revolved around two sets of justifications: administrative motives related to efficiency and economies of scale, and instructional motives concerned with effectiveness of education. These two perspectives are illustrated in the early 20th-century works of Ellwood Cubberley and Joseph Kennedy. Cubberley, who championed rural consolidation on the basis of urban experience, sought to professionalize rural education and always asked, "How large a school can be created?" Kennedy examined rural life and schools and asked how small a school could be and still remain pedagogically viable. This issue of upper and lower size limits has tended to resolve itself in the search for optimal school size. But this search may be misdirected, as emerging evidence suggests that a community's relative poverty or affluence is a likely indicator of a size-relevant variability. In this line of research, school size associated with high levels of student achievement appear to be tied to the socioeconomic status of a community. In addition, rural schools and urban schools face their own unique challenges related to school size. "House plans" that simulate small size are gaining in popularity but may not realize the benefits of small size without separate leadership and independent authority. There are no simple answers. Contains 15 references. (SV)

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Ongoing Dilemmas of School Size: A Short Story

by Craig Howley

RECENT national reports reinforce the growing perception that small schools are good schools. Is this new appreciation the result of changing fashion? Is it the latest fad in schooling? Does solid research suggest the superiority of small schools, and if so, how is it possible that the truth about school size could have been altered so dramatically in the space of a single generation?

It turns out that issues of size are not likely to be captured in universal guidelines. An appreciation of the history of the dilemmas of school size can help educators, citizens, and policy makers understand why.

Revolution or Irony?

The new appreciation of small schools must seem like a revolution to educators and policy makers who have devoted careers to building large and modern schools throughout the United States and Canada. Curiously, as a national phenomenon, most of this new appreciation is based on reports from urban, rather than rural, schools (e.g., Husén, 1985; Meier, 1995; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1996; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Oxley, 1994).

From the perspective of rural citizens, however, the new appreciation must seem more ironic than revolutionary. To this day rural communities in North America struggle to *retain* their small schools. In these cases, state or provincial education agencies continue to close small schools and create larger ones for the sake of alleged cost-efficiency and curricular breadth (DeYoung, 1995; Howley, 1996; Mulcahy, 1996; Theobald, 1995).

Two Concerns: Administration and Instruction

The earliest research literature about school and district size in North America comes from a period prior to 1925. Though research methods would be judged naive and inadequate by contemporary standards, this literature shelters an important lesson. Common justifications for building larger schools and closing smaller ones were *administrative* and *instructional*. The administrative motive keeps economy of scale in view—the idea that larger units can use staff and other resources more efficiently. The instructional motive tends to pay greater attention to the effectiveness of education. The two motives lead to quite different suggestions about school size.

These two perspectives are illustrated early in the 20th century by contemporaries Ellwood Cubberley and Joseph Kennedy. Cubberley's work is better remembered because it was the stronger influence on subsequent 20th century school reform. At the time they wrote, around 1915, North America was still a mostly rural domain.

Cubberley. Cubberley was a leading professor and former urban superintendent; he and his colleagues were engaged in an important urban project—creating schools for swelling, diverse populations in an industrializing America. Cubberley (1922) championed rural school consolidation on this basis.

Cubberley's idea was that pupil-teacher ratios could be increased in consolidated schools, longer terms could be held, transportation could be provided, and rural-appropriate curriculum could be consistently offered to farm children (today, of course, farming is no longer synonymous with "rural"). Schools and districts could be led and supervised by professional education administrators, whose presence would exert the influence of informed opinion and scientific knowledge in rural communities. Cubberley's rural agenda placed a premium on large school size. In essence, the question Cubberley always asked was "How large a school can be created?"

Kennedy. Kennedy was dean of the school of education at North Dakota State University, and his 1915 book, *Rural Life and the Rural School*, is rooted in Kennedy's own rural experience. Kennedy's question about size differed sharply from Cubberley's. His underlying question was something like this: "What is the lower limit of school size?" In the rural circumstance, it made sense to ask how small schools could be and still remain pedagogically viable. He wrote,

> It might happen, *as it frequently does*, that a school is already sufficiently large, active, and enthusiastic to make it inadvisable to *give up its identity* and become merged in the larger consolidated school. If there are twenty or thirty children and an efficient teacher we have the essential factors of a good school [emphasis added]. (Kennedy, 1914, p. 64)

Schools as Recognizable Institutions

The two guiding questions about size are salient today. In fact, the two questions can be combined: What are the upper and lower enrollment limits of an effective or efficient school?

Restated in this way, we can see that the questions actually represent the idea that schools *share* certain features that lead us to recognize them as schools and not something else. An institution intended to be a school, but which is too large, or too small, ceases thereby to be a school. The smallest "schools" may look like (or be) families and the largest "schools" may look like (or be) factories or prisons.

Unlike Cubberley and his contemporary readers, North Americans today understand that schools can be too large to perform effectively or even efficiently (e.g., NASSP, 1996). Interest in home-schooling, however, demonstrates that many North Americans are willing to allow that families can provide school-like experiences.

Contemporary Dilemmas

The lurking issue of upper and lower limits has usually tended to resolve itself in the search for optimal school size: What is the *one-best* size (or size range) for public elementary, junior high, and senior high schools? Usually, this one-best size or size range was not thought of as relative to circumstances, but was regarded as a sort of natural law.

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The relativism of optimal size. In recent decades, however, some researchers have dismissed the search for optimal size as naive or misdirected. In their view, the most suitable size for a school is likely to vary from place to place (see in particular the extensive work of David Monk and Emil Haller).

An emerging line of evidence suggests that a community's relative poverty or affluence is a likely indicator of size-relevant variability (Friedkin & Necochea, 1988; Howley, 1996; Plecki, 1991). In this line of research, school sizes associated with high levels of student achievement appear to be tied to the socioeconomic status of a community. Small schools are found to provide an achievement advantage for impoverished students, but not for affluent students, who may fare better in larger schools.

These findings are a challenge for school administration and educational policy, since additional evidence suggests that expenditures (per pupil or overall) exhibit a U-shaped association with size, with the largest and smallest schools showing *diseconomies* of scale (Fox, 1980). Not only are small schools more expensive to maintain on a per-pupil basis, but impoverished communities confront problems unimaginable to many affluent communities, and they do so with fewer resources. Taken together, the findings suggest that administrators and policy makers need to find ways to sustain and improve small schools in impoverished communities if they really expect all children to learn at high levels.

Rural challenges. Distance and topography often compound the challenges of large size in rural areas. Many rural schools have been closed; students typically endure long bus rides; and parents must travel long distances if they are to participate in school events. Widespread rural poverty also means that increases in school size—as in urban areas—may be educationally counterproductive in precisely the places most likely to be consolidation targets (e.g., Howley, 1996). *Sustainable Small Schools: A Handbook for Rural Communities*, edited by Craig B. Howley and Jon Eckman (1997), published by this Clearinghouse, can help rural community members grapple with these challenges.

Urban challenges. In urban communities, however, huge schools were created earlier in the century. In many communities changes in residential patterns have turned large, middle-class schools into large schools attended by impoverished students. Too many of these schools have become dysfunctional, serving society, individuals, and the local community badly. In cities, large schools can achieve a scale rarely found in rural areas, simply as a result of population density. Meier's (1995) *The Power of Their Ideas: Lessons for America from a Small School in Harlem* considers the reasons for and ways of creating and nurturing small schools in cities.

The danger of simulations. Is there anything magical about size that it should embody these dilemmas and pose these challenges? The answer is a guarded "yes." Size is the chief structural feature of an organization. That means we should expect it to influence lives (cf. Meier, 1995). If size is a structural phenomenon, however, caution is warranted in approaching the simulation of small size through such mechanisms as "schools-within-schools" and "house plans" (Meier, 1995; Oxley, 1994; Raywid, 1996). In general, despite substantial popularity, research on the effectiveness of simulating small size as a way to restructure is very limited (Raywid, 1996).

Deborah Meier (1995) suggests that such simulations are not likely to realize the benefits of small organizational scale. Separate buildings are not a requirement, says Meier; but separate leadership and independent authority are. Quite likely, an essential characteristic of the institution we call "school" is an independence similar to the sovereignty of nations (cf. Raywid, 1996).

No Simple Answers

Practitioners, citizens, and policy makers need to appreciate the complexity involved with considerations of size. More and more it seems that small schools hold particular promise for helping impoverished students maximize their potential to achieve academically. This hardly means that small schools are the best choice for all students under all circumstances.

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Note: This digest is part of a series on current issues related to small schools. For broader syntheses of the literature see Fowler (1992, ED 347 675), Stockard and Mayberry (1992, ED 350 674), and Cotton (1996, RC 020 728, ED number forthcoming), as well as other ERIC digests on small schools, school size, and learning environments in general. As of June 1996, the ERIC database (1966-1996) comprises 480 resources with "school size" as a major topic, including 130 research reports, of which approximately 65 have been published in the journal literature.

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